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The semiotic constitution of Kamsá ritual language*

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ABSTRACT

Recent studies of socially situated ways of speaking have reflected a growing uneasiness with the tidy dichotomies (for example, formal/informal, polite/casual) that have informed sociolinguistic inquiries in the past. The ritual language of the Kamsá indigenous community of Andean Colombia presents a serious challenge to these familiar conceptual molds. In elaborating a semiotic constitution for this speech variety, I articulate a model founded on three interrelated variables – accessibility, formalization, and efficacy – that may prove relevant to the discussion of ritual and ceremonial languages elsewhere. (Ritual and ceremonial languages, South American Indian speech forms, semiotics.)

There have been many accounts of formal ways of speaking, attesting to a major scholarly investment in the study of these speech varieties. At one stage of discovery, we have felt fortunate to identify serviceable dichotomies such as formal/informal, high/low, and sacred/secular, as a means of sorting out, in preliminary fashion, the data contained in our ethnographies. Recently, and in keeping with the growth and development of the ethnography of communication as a unified field of study, there have been expressions of uneasiness regarding these all-too-handly dichotomies. In one recent publication, Judith Irvine (1979) argues that the concept of formality is deceptively simple, and actually encompasses a range of related variables that must often be treated separately from one another. As our understanding of speech ecologies becomes ever more sophisticated, these preliminary dichotomies are revealed to be increasingly problematic.

In this paper I will explore in some detail a speech variety encountered in my fieldwork among the Kamsá Indians of Andean Colombia, one which presents a serious challenge to conventional dichotomies of the kind mentioned above. I refer to this speech variety, following the Kamsá, as Kamsá ritual language. Stylistically, this speech variety tends toward formalization, as this term has been developed in a number of studies (Tambiah 1968; Bloch 1974; Fox 1974; Irving 1979). Situationally, it is associated with occasions or moments of social ritual, consisting of “formal procedures of a communicative but arbitrary kind, having the effect of controlling or regularizing a social situation” (Firth 1972:3). The semiotic constitution elaborated in accounting for Kamsá ritual language contains three dimensions – accessibility, formalization, and efficacy – that may

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prove useful in accounting for these speech varieties generally, and in eventually working out a typology of communicative resources associated with ritual and ceremony.

KAMSÁ RITUAL LANGUAGE

The Kamsá Indians reside in the Sibundoy Valley of the Putumayo Territory in southwestern Colombia. They are a pastoral and horticultural community of some three thousand individuals. Their first language is Kamsá, a language isolate (Loukotka 1968), whereas Spanish is widely distributed in the community and Inga, a dialect of Quechuan stock, is spoken by some members of the community as well. I would characterize Kamsá ritual language as follows: a prayerful oratory with distinctive linguistic and performance features, composed during performance on the basis of traditional formulaic and thematic patterns, employed obligatorily in formal ceremonial occasions, and optionally in informal gatherings to honor and persuade.

The Kamsá refer to this speech variety in Kamsá as *jongwamiyan* (*jo*-verbal marker; *ngwa*-to search for; *miyan*-to speak), which they translate as "the speech of the census takers." Taking the census was one of the early functions of the *cabildo*, the organ of community self-government introduced by the Spanish, and to the present day Kamsá ritual language is closely associated with the activities of the *cabildo*, though its uses transcend that forum. In Spanish they refer to the ritual language as *el lenguaje* (the language) to which they sometimes append the descriptive elements *ritual*, *social*, or *ceremonial* (Juajibioy 1965; Juajibioy and Wheeler 1973). Kamsá ritual language is most commonly identified among the Kamsá as *el lenguaje ritual* (the ritual language).

Documentation on the history of Kamsá ritual language is scarce, and the earliest reference to something like it that I have come across dates back only to 1862:

They (the Indians) also greet travellers by kneeling before them and joining their hands together while muttering the garbled words "Most holy sacrament of the altar" . . . a humiliating custom which reveals how arrogant was the religion of the conquistadores (Bonilla 1972:35).

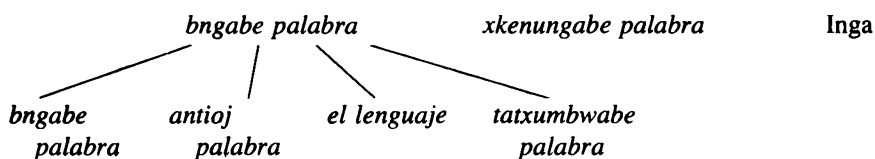
The *doctrineros*, or religious teachers, entered the Sibundoy Valley in the year of 1547, and in the absence of superior documentation, it would be plausible to date to that early period the fusion of pre-Colombian Kamsá and Spanish elements into a prototype of the present Kamsá ritual language (Bonilla 1972).

Preliminary investigation of the folk taxonomy for ways of speaking Kamsá reveals an only partially determined system, more reminiscent of what Brian Stross (1974) found among the Tzeltal than of the elaborate taxonomy Gary Gossen (1971) was able to work out for the Chamula. The highest level of contrast separates Kamsá from Spanish and Inga. Kamsá is known generically as

bngabe palabra (*bnga-we*; *be*-possessive marker; *palabra*-Spanish for 'word'), which could be translated as "our words." At this level the term contrasts most pointedly with the use of Spanish, known generically as *xkenungabe palabra* (*xkena*-white; *nga*-plural marker; *be*-possessive marker), "white people's words." The linguistic contrast noted here is only one element in a broad conceptual dichotomy setting apart *bngabe soy*, "our things," from *xkenungabe soy*, "white people's things". This contrast has taken on considerable emotional force in the present socioeconomic context of the Sibundoy Valley.

At the next level in the taxonomy, the term *bngabe palabra* appears again as the unmarked category comprehending all ordinary uses of the Kamsá language. Here it contrasts with three specialized uses of Kamsá: *el lenguaje* (Kamsá ritual language); *antioj palabra* (ancient words), the generic term for folk narrative, both myth and folktale, indigenous to the Kamsá community; and *tatxumbwabe palabra* (curer's words), referring to the esoteric speech, song, and whistling of the herbal and spiritual healers. Other, finer calibrations in the domain of speaking are sometimes made, but these are highly variable and personal, and appear to be better considered as descriptive tags rather than categories in a taxonomy.

Kamsá ritual language takes its place in a speech taxonomy as sketched below:



Subsequent discussion should bring out some of the distinctive features of each of the four Kamsá speech categories, though the primary focus, of course, is on Kamsá ritual language.

The usage profile

Kamsá ritual language exhibits a diversified usage profile. It appears in ceremonial as well as ordinary settings; in religious as well as secular contexts; and in rites of passage as well as in everyday rites such as greetings and leave-takings. Gary Gossen (1971:162) observes that ritual speech "is constantly present in Chamula life," and the same observation could be made of ritual language among the Kamsá. The four major domains of usage are political ceremony, Catholic rites of passage, secular rites, and everyday talk. I should note that narrative can mimic any of these uses associated with particular social contexts (McDowell 1982).

Ceremony

Kamsá ritual language most closely approaches political oratory in the yearly address given by the incoming governor to the assembled community. In addition, all public business in the cabildo is accompanied by speeches in the ritual

language. All of the officers of the *cabildo* must be competent in the ritual language, and thus control over this speech variety is a prerequisite to advancing in political stature within the community. There is no formal instruction available; the well-rounded individual must develop competence in the ritual language through gaining exposure to it in its range of speech contexts, and through private rehearsal. While only men are officers in the *cabildo*, women also learn the ritual language, as they encounter it in some of its other settings.

Rites of Passage. The Catholic life cycle provides a number of transition points that are marked by special proceedings in the church and related activities later in the home. The major Catholic rites of passage are the wedding, the funeral, the baptism, the first communion, and confirmation. After the church ceremony associated with each of these, the family, friends, and sponsors return home where ritual and festive activities take place, culminating invariably in a *chicha* party. *Chicha* is a home-brew which serves as a social lubricant on most occasions of sociability.

Each rite of passage entails the naming of sponsors, known to the Kamsá as *compadres*, or ritual co-parents (Mintz and Wolf 1950). Ritual language is used to invite the sponsors to perform their roles in the ceremonies, to accomplish the appropriate ceremonial activities, and to thank the sponsors for doing their part. The sponsors respond to these courtesies in ritual language also. After these preliminaries are seen to, the host bestows one or more barrels of *chicha* upon the sponsors, using ritual language to do so, and the party begins. The *chicha* is distributed nonrandomly throughout the crowd in attendance, again accompanied by episodes of ritual language. As the mood of the party becomes more festive, flutes and drums appear and people dance and drink until the *chicha* is gone, frequently for as many as three consecutive days (McDowell 1978).

Secular Ritual. There are two main secular rituals calling for the use of ritual language. The *agradecimiento*, or thanksgiving, is arranged by one individual to express publicly his appreciation for another who has done him some notable favor. For example, if your father-in-law gives you a plot of land, or if a skillful carpenter supervises the building of your home, you would be likely to offer them *agradecimientos*. I took part in one *agradecimiento* in honor of the family who gave lodging to my host's son while the latter was attending high school in the town of Sibundoy. The *agradecimiento* includes a ritualized meal punctuated with interludes of ritual language, and a *chicha* party along the lines of the one described above in relation to the festivities following upon Catholic rites of passage.

The other instance of secular ritual occurs during the Kamsá carnival, known to the Kamsá as *klistrinyí*. It is customary during this week of collective celebration to ask for a blessing from an elder. The solicitor approaches the elder, kneels before him, and requests the blessing, using ritual language. The elder responds

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in ritual language, giving his solicitor some traditional wisdom and his blessing. The younger person then rises and thanks the elder, again using ritual language to do so.

Everyday. Shading off into secular ritual but part of the daily routine are the greeting and leave-taking, accomplished through the use of ritual language when the participants are not residents of the same household and stand in a position of mutual respect toward one another. Among elders who have not seen one another for some time, these exchanges may be quite lengthy, on the order of one hundred words spoken by each of the conversants.

Ritual language may appear, additionally, as a flash of formality lodged in a casual conversational setting, especially when the speaker wishes to solicit a favor from his or her interlocutor. Thus a special code associated with ceremony may appear in attenuated form in casual discourse.

Table 1 summarizes the uses of ritual language:

TABLE 1. *The uses of Kamsá ritual language*

	Domain of Use	Event
increasing formality of occasion	ceremony	governor's salute to the community formal transactions in the cabildo
	Catholic rites of passage	weddings funerals baptisms first communions confirmations
	secular ritual	the agradecimiento the carnival blessing
decreasing formality of occasion	everyday	greetings, farewells rhetorical flashes

The ritual language takes on different tones and hues depending on the context of usage. The rhetorical flash may be nothing more than a kinship term used figuratively as a means of address in an otherwise informal discourse context. The other extreme would be the traditional greeting which is saturated with elements of heightened discourse. Along the entire continuum connecting these two extremes, ritual language retains a fundamental consistency such that its presence is unmistakable to the ear regardless of the social occasion in which it is heard. The identifying elements in ritual language can be sought in its linguistic, performance, and thematic features.

Linguistic features

These may be located at several levels. In the phonology one interesting feature is the double vowel /ii/, which replaces the single vowel /i/ in some contexts.

This phonological feature is not prominent in other Kamsá speech varieties, and is not mentioned in Linda Howard's study of the Kamsá phonological system (Howard 1967). Pending further investigation, I would characterize it as an expressive feature tied to the conspicuous politeness dimension of Kamsá ritual language.

At the morphological level, one notable feature is morpheme accumulation (Albó 1970). Whereas the ratio of affixes to roots is about the same in the ritual-language discourse as in other varieties of Kamsá (roughly 1.32), the mode of affix accumulation is quite different. Ritual-language discourse presents a small number of highly affixed roots alternating with roots that have few or no affixes, whereas conversational varieties evince a more regular accumulation of affixes. In the varieties of *bingabe palabra* and *antioj palabra* it is extremely unusual to find roots accompanied by more than six affixes. In ritual-language discourse there may be as many as eleven affixes attached to a single root, and affix counts of six to ten per root are commonplace. Kamsá ritual language thus presents to the ear these ponderous, highly inflected words to a degree unknown in other speech varieties.

The lexicon of Kamsá ritual language is distinctive on several counts. For one thing, it contains a large number of historical borrowings from Spanish, elevated into a prominent place in the discourse either as verbal roots or substantives carrying a major conceptual burden. In ordinary discourse Spanish loans account for some 20 percent of the lexicon, while in the ritual language this figure comes to 60 percent. The loans are fully assimilated to Kamsá phonology and syntax, yet they generally are recognized by the Kamsá as words of Spanish provenience. The set of loans appearing with frequency in Kamsá ritual language lends this speech variety much of its religious, liturgical aura:

Verbs

- kweda* (f. *cuidar*, to take care of)
- pasentsia* (f. *tener paciencia*, to have mercy)
- lesentsia* (f. *lisenciar*, to permit)
- perdona* (f. *perdonar*, to pardon)
- lastemañe* (f. *lastimarse*, to damage)

Nouns and Adjectivals

- delikado* (f. *delicado*, delicate)
- kardado* (f. *caridad*, charity)
- remidio* (f. *remedio*, cure)
- okasion* (f. *ocasión*, occasion)
- mundo* (f. *mundo*, world)

In some cases these loans acquire a special meaning in the context of Kamsá ritual language. Thus *okasion* is used to denote a troublesome occasion in particular, and *mundo* is used to denote specifically God's creation. Even those loans remaining semantically close to the original Spanish meanings are thoroughly

integrated into the prevailing Catholic worldview expressed in Kamsá ritual language.

Another notable characteristic of the ritual-language lexicon is the accomplishment of all personal address through the use of kinship terms. If the addressee is in fact next of kin, the appropriate term for addressing that relative will be used. If the addressee is not of kin to the speaker, a small set of kinship terms are available for figurative use. These terms take into account the sex of the addressee, and the relative age of speaker and addressee, as follows:

- male addressee; vis-à-vis the speaker
 - of equal age: *taitá* (father)
 - of lesser age: *taitá sobren* (father nephew)
 - of greater age: *taitá bakó* (father uncle)
- female addressee; vis-à-vis the speaker
 - of equal age: *mama* (mother)
 - of lesser age: *base mama* (little mother)
 - of greater age: *bata mama* (aunt mother)

Although the Kamsá naming system consists of multiple naming units including legal names and nicknames (McDowell 1981), only the kinship term in its literal or figurative sense may be used for personal address in Kamsá ritual language.

Other lexical constraints in Kamsá ritual language involve the usage of a specific vocabulary item in favor of other possible means of expressing the same concept. For example, the speaker always refers to himself as *atxe pobre-na* (I poor-indefinite object marker), roughly “my humble self”. Many commonplace objects may be referred to through two lexical items, one associated with ordinary discourse and the other with elevated discourse. An instance of this is the dog, known in ordinary discourse as *kex*, and in elevated discourse as *shbwayá*, literally “hunting dog.” The adept hunting dogs that accompany the culture-heros on their rounds are referred to as *shbwayá*, and it is this lexical item too which is used in Kamsá ritual language when the speaker wishes to refer to the concept ‘dog.’

In general, the lexical constraints evident in Kamsá ritual language accord rather well to those noted by Stanley Newman (1964) with reference to Zuni sacred language, wherein specialization of meaning (an everyday word given special meaning), and the employment of substitute forms, account for the distinctiveness of the lexicon.

Performance features

Although the linguistic features just cited are certainly distinctive to Kamsá ritual language, and mark its divergence from other Kamsá speech varieties, it is a small set of performance features which most conclusively signals the presence of this marked speech variety. Most notably, the Kamsá ideal of *turn-taking* is suspended: if addressed in ritual language, the proper response is to return the

address in such a way as to create a collage of the two voices. The initial speaker retains the initiative; the respondent takes his cue from the words directed to him and formulates his response on this basis. The pattern of overlap between the two voices is a kind of dovetailing, as shown schematically below:

(initiator) _____
 (respondant) _____

For those segments of the production exhibiting a superimposition of one voice on top of the other, each speaker is likely to tighten the vocal cords to produce a more strident vocal tone. This deliberate and demanding achievement of simultaneous talk is clearly at variance with the normal tendency of alternate turns at talk.

The paralinguistic features of timing and intonation also help to determine the unique aural texture of Kamsá ritual language. It is spoken rapidly. In a sample of ordinary discourse in Kamsá, the rate of articulation measured in words per second was .8; the corresponding figure for the ritual language is 2.8, more than a threefold acceleration. The pace of delivery is almost unbelievably fast, all the more remarkable in an improvisatory medium. An element of gaming often surfaces in these performances, as the two speakers push the rate of articulation to its limits in a cooperative and competitive synchrony.

Ritual language displays an intonation contour reminiscent of Catholic prayer, and if the ear is to be a guide, there must surely be a direct influence here. Ritual language is one of those intermediate forms between speech and song. The voice clings to a set of three distinct tones, and periodically traverses the intervals between them. This produces a decidedly musical effect, and ritual language could be considered a form of chanting (List 1963). Figure 1 presents a very simplified sketch of the essential melodic line heard in ritual language. The sketch indicates a series of phrases incorporating a rising fourth, with closure achieved through alteration of this pattern in favor of a falling fifth. It is through these tonal patterns, rather than through rhyme or alliteration, that the performer creates an artistic phrasing of the material. As is shown in Figure 2, there is a tendency for the units of time articulated by these shifts in pitch to be isochronic, with vocal stress on the syllables pronounced upon arrival at the higher fourth or lower fifth.

The prosodic units of ritual language are these phrases articulated through tonal closure, themselves composed of constitutive units incorporating a pitch leap of a fourth on stressed syllables and marking off roughly isochronic segments of time. These constraints regarding pitch, timing, and articulatory stress

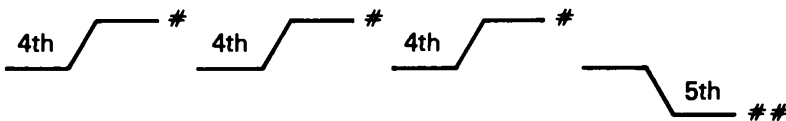


FIGURE 1: The intonational contour of Kamsá ritual language.

SEMIOTIC CONSTITUTION OF KAMSÁ RITUAL LANGUAGE

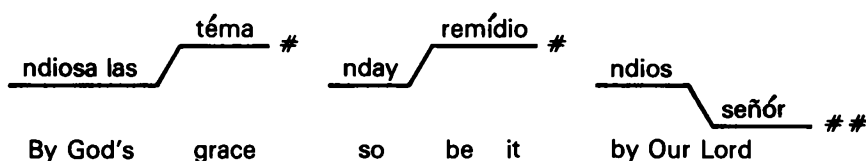


FIGURE 2: The patterning of stress in Kamsá ritual language.

are particular to the poetic grammar of Kamsá ritual language; other forms of Kamsá discourse are less determined with respect to these variables.

Thematics

Kamsá ritual language is also distinctive for its thematic content. Let us consider the text of a traditional greeting recorded in the field:

Kamsá Traditional Greeting (English translation)

- 1 By the grace of God so be it you are still well.
- 2 Our Lord and the Virgin, may They keep you from harm, may They protect you.
- 3 In God's world with a courteous word of greeting we have surely come together.
- 4 Father Uncle thus without malice this word of greeting as we have come together so be it without harm by Our Lord.
- 5 As long as we may live may He keep us in soul, family, and person; may He preserve you in this world, may He keep us, may He protect us from harm by Our Lord so be it.
- 6 Since He is keeping me from harm, since he is protecting me in His world, in His world like our ancestors I am following in His footsteps.
- 7 May He have mercy on me, may He forgive me. There will come a time when each of us must give account of soul, family, person. Father Uncle thus forgive me, thus allow me to procede without harm by Our Lord.

The Response (English translation)

- 1 As you say so be it, there is no trouble or problem between us.
- 2 From heaven God the Father and the Virgin Mother are surely watching over us. So be it between the two of us this word of greeting.
- 3 My eyes see that we have surely come together in this place. My God has surely been watching over us without harm by Our Lord.
- 4 Firstly, from heaven Our Father and Mother, may They send you a fine blessing, with compassion and charity. May They bestow this upon us. May They continue to have mercy on us, may They continue to forgive us.
- 5 There later so it must be each of us must give account of soul, family, person. Respected friend, Father Nephew, please forgive me, please pardon me, without harm by Our Lord.

This greeting exchange took place as the elder man arrived on the premises of the younger man. The elder initiated the greeting, and his host responded. The greeting consisted of seven phrases articulated by tonal closure, the response consisted of five. The two men saw each other fairly frequently, but there existed between them a strong relationship of both respect and friendship, for the elder was the father of one of the younger man's compadres; moreover, the younger man had done some favors for the elder during the former's tenure as a member of the *cabildo*. These considerations account for the duration and degree of formality of the exchange.

It is at first surprising that an earthly encounter of mortals provokes such intense allusion to heaven, but the central theme of all Kamsá ritual language is that the events which so engulf us in the here-and-now are in fact dependent on the cosmological charter provided in the religious worldview. There is a compression of linear time here, so that present events signify both the precedents laid down by the ancestors and the culmination of historical time in the final judgment. The present acquires significance through its relationship to this time-less mythological charter.

Let us inspect one key phrase from line 6 of the greeting to see how this reformulation of present events operates:

cha-be mundo ts-j-i-ye-ts-a-shekwastona
his world I (like our ancestors) am following his steps

I wish to draw attention to one particular morpheme, the marker of legendary discourse {ye}. This grammatical form contrasts with {t}, the marker of recent or historical time. Kamsá mythic narrative is referred to as *antioj palabra* (ancient words). Discourse in this mode concerns the times when human beings and animals were not yet distinguished, and Our Lord walked upon the earth. On the grammatical plane, the unequivocal marker of *antioj palabra* is the legendary morpheme {ye}. The presence of this morpheme in ritual language underlines the continuity between the mythological archetype and present events. Ritual language signals through the use of this morpheme (which I translate in line 6 as "like our ancestors") a relationship of identity between the mythic frame and the present moment. Time and its transformations are denied, and we are returned to the immutable archetype of all proper conduct.

Other thematic features of Kamsá ritual language derive from this virtual negation of time. The restriction of personal address to kinship terms emphasizes the primordial community, not as a form of *communitas* tending to negate hierarchy, for the kinship terms preserve and even intensify the notion of hierarchy; but rather as a structured community taken as a model for contemporary social relations (Turner 1969). In this uncertain world only adherence to this model holds any promise for well-being. The threatening nature of life on earth, conveyed in the Spanish-derived substantives *lastimañe* (harm), *delikado* (trouble), and *okasiona* (problems) can be mitigated only through adherence to the

timeless charter. And, a day of reckoning awaits us all, when we will be judged on the basis of our fidelity to the proper forms of conduct laid down in the example of our ancestors. This constellation of related themes permeates the ritual language of the Kamsá Indians. Their precise formulation varies from one speech to another, for these speeches are not memorized but rather composed during performance, but the vitality of the thematic cluster centered on the negation of linear time transcends its variable realization in particular ritual language speeches.

Three content categories are distinguishable in Kamsá ritual language. First, there are the general formulaic expressions realizing the central thematic cluster mentioned above. These expressions provide the ritual language with its litany of religious proposition. Returning to our sample text, the traditional greeting, we can identify lines 1, 2, 5, 6 and 7 in the greeting, and lines 4 and 5 in the response as exemplars of this first content category. Formulaic expressions like these recur periodically throughout the entire corpus of Kamsá ritual language. They combine a set of conventional propositions drawn from Catholic dogma with a typically Kamsá preoccupation with the ways of the ancestors – a preoccupation quite evident in the body of Kamsá mythic narrative, largely a pre-Colombian store.

A second content category signals the embedding of the ritual-language speech in a particular social rite. The expressions belonging to this category are not freely transferred from one speech to another, for they make reference to the kind of event taking place. Still, these are generic references, so that these expressions can circulate within that part of the ritual-language corpus associated with a particular social rite. Lines 3 and 4 of the traditional greeting, and lines 1, 2, and 3 of the response contain material reflecting the precise nature of the encounter that has called forth the use of ritual language. The generic character of these expressions allows them to circulate within a certain subset of the entire corpus, but simultaneously deprives them of the capacity to encode very much information concerning the species of the genre, that is, the accidental features rendering each greeting encounter or each wedding ceremony in some sense unique. Skeletal information of this kind is recorded in the choice of terms of address, as we have seen, and additional information concerning the nature of the relationship between participants in ritual-language speeches is conveyed indirectly through the degree of verbal elaboration on the basic ritual-language exchange. Thus the elaborate speeches illustrated in our sample greeting exchange indicate a relationship of mutual respect between the two speakers. But the great majority of these particular details of occasion necessarily go unrecorded in Kamsá ritual-language speeches.

The third and final content category is that of the operative segments of ritual language, thought to make ritual-language speeches effective. Their essential function is to allow for the correct procedural transition from one phase to another of the ritual encounter. Some of these are purely transitional, involving

requests to procede with the ritual business at hand. Others carry the illocutionary force (Austin 1962) of thanking or beseeching, again with reference to the ritual transaction in progress. In addition to these, there are three operative or performative speech acts in Kamsá ritual language whose efficacy transcends the ritual occasion in which they are lodged. Their realization tends to be constant and highly stylized, and their import is intimately related to the inherent purposes of Kamsá ritual language – the manipulation and maintenance of the social contract. Each of these performative speech acts customarily brings to closure one major unit in the ritual-language speech.

The most ubiquitous of the three, and the least formalized, is the beseeching of forgiveness from a fellow human being. This speech act is widely distributed in the corpus of Kamsá ritual language, and frequently occurs at the end of ritual-language speeches (for example, see line 7 of the greeting response). While there is some degree of morphological variation in its realization, a canonic form is easily identified:

x-mo-pasentsia (please forgive me.)

1 2 3

1 first-person object pronoun

2 imperative

3 verbal stem, 'to forgive', from Spanish.

The forgiveness sought here relates primarily to any possible offense taken during the ritual transaction, but implicitly reaches out to enfold the prior and perhaps the posterior relationship between the two individuals. This speech act properly conveys the speaker's humility and his respect for his addressee.

The speech act of beseeching divine forgiveness is also widely distributed in the corpus and again, despite some morphological variation, a canonic form can be specified:

cha-xu-wi-pasentsia cha-xu-wi-perdona (May He forgive me, may He pardon me.)

1 2 3 4 1 2 3 5

1 future tense marker of the verb, used as a polite imperative

2 first-person object pronoun

3 an intensifier

4 verbal stem, 'to forgive'

5 verbal stem, 'to pardon' (also from Spanish).

This speech act exhibits a greater degree of formalization, evident primarily in the parallelism, but also in the use of the indirect imperative and in the presence of the intensification morph. These stylistic devices accompany a speech act whose reference is to the supernatural plane; they were absent from the previous speech act, whose scope of reference was confined to the mortal plane. There is a correlation between the referential scope of the speech act and its stylistic elaboration.

The third performative speech act is the conferral of the blessing upon a fellow mortal. This is a key transaction in a number of ritual encounters, especially the wedding and the carnival blessing. For this speech act to be properly executed, the speaker and addressee must stand in an asymmetrical relationship to one another. The one who confers the blessing must be a member of an ascending generation with respect to the recipient of the blessing. Moreover, there is commonly some bond of kinship, either actual or fictive, uniting the two individuals. Some of the typical dyads performing this speech act are shown below:

<i>conferrer</i>	<i>conferree</i>
father	son
grandfather	grandson
uncle (mother's brother)	nephew
father-in-law	son-in-law
godfather	godson
ex-governor	younger member of the cabildo

As the list indicates, this speech act is restricted in ritual language speeches to male participants. Fathers may give the blessing to their daughters, but not in ceremonial contexts of the kind we are discussing here.

The conferral of the blessing brings into play a highly elaborate set of words and actions that must be coordinated by the two participants. The younger man kneels before the elder, who initiates the speech act with the following phrase:

polvo jaftsekeda bwakwatxekena respeto kwachenoperdey
dust to remain arm respect not to lose

With this arm that will return to dust I will procede . . .

At this point he pronounces the blessing which must be repeated word-perfect in order to be effective:

la bendición del padre, del hijo, del espíritu santo
The blessing of the Father, of the Son, of the Holy Ghost.

While pronouncing these words, the elder man traces the sign of the cross over the head of the man kneeling before him.

This speech act is distinctive on several counts. The integral blessing phrase is lifted whole from Catholic litany, and unlike the other speech acts we have considered, must be repeated verbatim. Moreover, this speech act occasions a dramatic pause in the flow of ritual language, as the younger man falls silent and the elder methodically pronounces the blessing. These distinctive features point to the special institutional standing of this speech act: only here does the speaker symbolically move into another *persona*, that of a human intermediary between the divine and mortal planes. The model for this transformation is the Catholic priest, who serves as God's intermediary on earth.

The speech act of conferring the blessing, like the other two performative speech acts we have considered, remains firmly situated within the societal frame, despite its invocation of the holy trinity. At the wedding ceremony the

father bestows his blessing on his son who is about to be married, and thereby effectively releases him so that he may take on a new set of responsibilities. The blessing given during the Kamsá carnival carries several layers of meaning. At one level, it evinces the mutual respect felt by the two men toward one another. At another, it reinforces social bonds potentially present in the encounter of these two specific individuals. Finally, the carnival blessing acts as an endorsement of carnival, which is framed in the surrounding ritual-language discourse as a custom passed on from the time of the ancestors. As one elder says in a ritual-language prologue to his conferral of the blessing, "Our ancestors, our great-grandparents left us this custom, we are conserving it, we are following in their footsteps."

THE SEMIOTIC CONSTITUTION

Speech varieties may be described in terms of their semiotic constitution, that is the integrated set of principles relating the formal properties of discourse within the variety to the circumstances of its employment. In order to specify the semiotic constitution of Kamsá ritual language I will have recourse to three interrelated criteria: (1) the accessibility of this speech variety; (2) formalization of discourse in this speech variety; and (3) the efficacy of discourse within this speech variety. These considerations should allow us to pinpoint the distinctive quality of Kamsá ritual language with respect to other ways of speaking Kamsá, and provisionally locate Kamsá ritual language within the field of related speech varieties reported in the ethnographic literature.

Accessibility

Speech varieties may be characterized with respect to their accessibility. In the Kamsá speech taxonomy, for instance, the ordinary speech style, *bngabe palabra*, is highly accessible to members of the speech community, while the curing speech of the spiritual healers is accessible only to the specialists in this field. Narrative discourse, especially *antioj palabra*, is also highly accessible to community members, though somewhat less so than ordinary discourse due to certain restrictions as to who may tell which kinds of tales, and to certain linguistic complications, such as the use of some specialized lexicon and of the attitudinal affixing system that comes into play in this speech format. In general, two barriers to variety access can be identified: institutional barriers restricting code use to a certain category of individuals, and linguistic or performance barriers rendering the variety inaccessible or inscrutable to persons lacking special training or insight.

The issue of accessibility in the case of Kamsá ritual language is quite complex, for it is necessary to distinguish between the ability to understand and to produce speech in this variety, on the one hand, and between its saturated and attenuated forms, on the other. Broadly speaking, it may be said that Kamsá

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ritual language occupies an intermediary position between ordinary discourse in Kamsá, which is highly accessible, and the curing speech of the spiritual healers, which is highly inaccessible. The precise configuration of accessibility for Kamsá ritual language is captured in the following set of characterizations:

1. There are few institutional barriers to the use of this variety; it is available, at least in theory, to all Kamsá adults.
2. There are certain practical barriers to the use of this variety, stemming from its inherent linguistic and performance properties; these may be overcome through exposure to the variety and through the exercise of native verbal capacity.
3. The variety exists in attenuated forms which are less problematic for community members.
4. Speech in this variety is broadly intelligible to all native speakers, though some passages remain opaque to even the most knowledgeable.
5. The ability to employ this variety properly is an important criterion of personhood in Kamsá society.

The only institutional barrier to variety access in the case of Kamsá ritual language is its confinement to the adult population of the Kamsá community. Neither outsiders nor Kamsá children are addressed in this speech variety, though they may be present when it is spoken by others. Children hear a good deal of ritual-language discourse and gradually develop competence in it, though this competence is rarely manifested until they marry and enter into the kinds of social transactions calling for the use of the ritual language.

While all Kamsá adults, in principle, have access to the ritual language, there are wide differences to be observed in the degree of proficiency attained in it from one individual to another, ranging from universally acknowledged mastery to only a halting competency. Kamsá ritual language diverges from ordinary discourse in Kamsá, as we have seen, so that fluency in the latter does not guarantee fluency in the former. The distinctive features setting off Kamsá ritual language from ordinary modes of discourse – its demanding performance technique and its peculiar linguistic and thematic elements – make this speech variety challenging even to the native speaker. The individual must possess a seasoned familiarity with the ritual language, as well as some considerable degree of native verbal ability, in order to adequately master it.

The acquisition of competence in the ritual language depends in large part on continuous exposure to speech in this variety. Individuals tied into the Kamsá social fabric are certain to hear plenty of ritual-language speeches, since these occur at all rites of passage and at other ceremonial events of importance to the community. Taking on the role of a responsible Kamsá adult (by marrying and raising a family) propels the individual into situations where he or she must actually perform ritual language. Private rehearsal prior to these events, and active participation in them, solidify the individual's incipient grasp of this speech variety. Should the young family-man become a member of the *cabildo*,

exposure to the ritual language becomes all the more frequent and intense. And finally, considerable mastery over the ritual language is a prerequisite to advancing in rank in the *cabildo* to eventually become governor of the community. The recognized masters of Kamsá ritual language generally are former governors of the community.

The earlier presentation of Kamsá ritual language described the speech variety in its most saturated form, but it also exists in certain attenuated forms which are correctly employed by all Kamsá adults, even those lacking experience in its saturated form. These attenuated forms are like distant echoes of the saturated form; they incorporate only a few of its distinctive features and these only to a marginal extent. They tend to occur in the midst of ordinary discourse, and could be considered as moments of formality lodged in informal discourse. They constitute a means of embroidering speech, especially speech with a strong conative function. In drawing these forms into a conversation the speaker appropriates for his message the seriousness and authority vested in Kamsá ritual language in its saturated forms. A similar phenomenon is reported by Dennis Tedlock (1976) for the Zuni.

Kamsá ritual language in attenuated form typically involves the utterance of a phrase or even a single word associated with the more saturated forms of this speech variety. In these renditions the performance features distinctive to Kamsá ritual language are dropped, so that the aural texture of the words uttered is continuous with ordinary delivery in Kamsá. What remains distinctive is the lexicon, which employs vocabulary items recognized as belonging to the ritual language in its saturated form; and the semantics, which retains the references to the divinity and to the ways of the ancestors.

One common device marking these attenuated forms is the presence of a figurative kinship term as a term of address in ordinary conversation. In ordinary discourse personal address is generally not accomplished through the use of these figurative kinship terms, but rather through the use of the other naming units in the Kamsá naming system. The appearance of one of these kinship terms in ordinary discourse is quite noticeable, and draws special attention to the words that accompany it. Frequently the figurative kinship term will be accompanied by a short phrase incorporating one or more of the key words of Spanish origin carrying the brunt of the religious message of Kamsá ritual language in its saturated forms. In these attenuated forms the Spanish verbal stems are rarely couched in the elaborate morphological environments associated with the more saturated form of the speech variety.

Perhaps the most abbreviated form of all, and one which has taken on such an important role in ordinary conversation that its origin in the ritual language is now immaterial, is the polite response formula *apay*. This lexical item can be traced back through its intermediate form, *as le pay*, the informal thanking formula, to its Spanish source, *dios le pague* (May God reward you). In ritual language the expression *apay* serves to mark a response speech, that is, a speech

made by a respondent in response to being addressed in ritual language. Thus the Kamsá text of our sample greeting response opens with this wording. But this expression has taken on a related function in everyday discourse, as an empathy marker. Thus when hearing of some trouble experienced by a friend, the appropriate response, to be fitted into the conversation at regular intervals as the story progresses, is *apay*. This form could just as well be classified as a part of the normal lexicon of ordinary conversational Kamsá. But this is a marginal case; the other lexical items evocative of Kamsá ritual language inserted into ordinary discourse stand out clearly as imports from another speech variety.

Another aspect of accessibility, in addition to the ability to produce ritual language, is the ability to understand it. Kamsá ritual language presents two faces in this respect. Ritual-language discourse is broadly intelligible to native speakers, who are able to provide rough glosses for every ritual-language utterance. These glosses tend to key on the central lexical stems, which in a sense anchor this discourse in a reliable semantic field. When pressed for precise exegesis of ritual-language discourse, Kamsá speakers, even those who are competent producers of ritual-language discourse, have some difficulty coming up with translations or paraphrases that they themselves might find satisfactory. Thus broad exegesis produces fairly satisfying and consensual results, while narrow exegesis primarily produces frustration.

The limits to intelligibility in the case of Kamsá ritual language are two. In the first place, certain lexical items have lost touch with their etymological roots so that their meaning is carried primarily by the circumstances of their usage. It is difficult to stand back from words like *kardado*, for example, and assign them a constant denotative meaning. It is possible to trace them to their source meanings, for example, the Spanish *caridad* (charity), but this strategy throws surprisingly little light on the actual uses of these words, and perhaps even less on the way in which Kamsá speakers respond to them. In cases of this kind, the essential semantic function of the lexical item is to signal the fact that ritual language is being spoken (Murray 1977). Maurice Bloch's point (1974:75) that words in ritual "perform less as parts of a language and more as *things*, in the same way as material symbols," is pertinent here and helps specify one source of unintelligibility in Kamsá ritual language.

Another limit to intelligibility in Kamsá ritual language is the tendency to lump together large assortments of affixes around the central verbal stems used in the speech variety. These clusters of affixes, which may number as many as twelve in the ritual language, are exceedingly difficult to translate or to paraphrase. While each affix has a fairly dependable semantic load in ordinary discourse in Kamsá, in such weighty combination they defy tidy exegesis. This is not to say that morphemes may be combined indiscriminately in the ritual language. Speakers observe combinatory constraints in this speech variety just as they do in the other varieties of Kamsá. But in producing exegesis of the ponderous lexical items found in ritual language discourse, my Kamsá consultants

tended to fasten their interpretations onto the verbal stems, and provide only the most general exegesis of the morphological environments in which these stems are embedded.

In the traditional culture, no Kamsá adult is complete unless he or she can hold their own in Kamsá ritual language. We have seen that competence in this speech variety is essential to the fulfilment of adult roles in the society. Proper comportment at rites of passages and at incidental events such as *agradecimientos* calls for the use of ritual language. Involvement in community self-government is also premised on the ability to perform in this speech variety. Individuals, especially men, who are unable to do so are likely to occupy a marginal status in the community, and they may find themselves excluded from major social transactions capable of enhancing their social standing. To cite one obvious liability, the individual who cannot produce ritual language may encounter problems in recruiting desirable *compadres* as sponsors for family members at rites of passages such as weddings, funerals, first communions, baptisms, and the like. Some of these individuals may linger at the margins of Kamsá society; others transfer their allegiance to the national culture and acquire social standing in that milieu through the accumulation of material objects and capital.

The capacity to produce ritual language is not strictly determinative here. Allowances are made for persons who cannot produce ritual language, if there are other factors to be taken into account such as the ownership of large parcels of land, or the attainment of worldly success in the mestizo society. But the capacity to produce ritual language remains one important criterion within the set of criteria determining social standing within the community. We have noted that individuals engage in testing procedures meant to determine their interlocutor's relative skills with the ritual language. My host and primary consultant among the Kamsá, don Justo Jacanamijoy, confided to me, *cuando me hablan no me quedo callado* (When they speak to me, I do not remain silent). The well-rounded Kamsá adult is able to perform ritual language in its saturated form, so that he can respond appropriately when addressed in this speech variety. Elders in the community sometimes become irascible at the spectacle of an adult Kamsá who remains mute while being addressed in ritual language.

Formalization

Kamsá ritual language diverges from ordinary modes of discourse in Kamsá, as we have seen, and it is this palpable differentiation that makes this speech variety available for its special uses in the realm of Kamsá sociability. There are linguistic factors, performance factors, and thematic factors responsible for its distinctive qualities; in concert these create the special aural texture and semantic valency associated with Kamsá ritual language.

The divergence of the ritual language from ordinary ways of speaking Kamsá is achieved through the operation of the following principles:

1. increased structuring of linguistic output, evident at several levels of analysis (cf. Jakobson 1960);
2. thorough exploitation of selected linguistic resources, accompanied by the adaptation of certain conventional forms and practices;
3. confinement of reference to a bounded universe.

These principles work together, each within its own appropriate theater of action, to produce the observable autonomy of Kamsá ritual language. They are intended to describe the saturated form of this speech variety; attenuated forms draw very selectively on these principles, and confine their impact essentially to the lexicon, as has been noted in the earlier discussion of these phenomena.

The increased structuring of linguistic output is especially evident in the prosodic organization of intonation, and in the arrangement of concepts into parallelistic phrases. Kamsá ritual language fixes the amorphous intonational system of ordinary Kamsá into predictable sequences of tones deployed in a tritonal pattern. These discourse units defined by intonational patterns function in the ritual language as prosodic units much like those determined in other poetic forms by the operation of meter and rhyme. The formulation of parallelistic phrases, as in the canonic form of the speech act of beseeching forgiveness from the deity, remains a tendency, only partially realized, but nonetheless distinctive of Kamsá ritual language.

Kamsá ritual language is selective in terms of its employment of conventional linguistic forms. In the realm of personal address, for example, only the kinship term is used; other forms of personal address are entirely proscribed. But within the linguistic systems represented in the ritual language, there is often a degree of completeness transcending that to be found in the normal paradigms. We have seen how Kamsá ritual language develops the paradigm of kinship terms beyond its routine scope, by adapting it to a series of figurative uses. The morphological system present in Kamsá ritual language is a more fully developed system than the one that can be identified in ordinary Kamsá discourse. This analysis suggests that there are problems in labeling ritual languages as impoverished languages, as Maurice Bloch (1974) does. In one sense, Kamsá ritual language is impoverished in that it excludes certain conventional forms; but in another sense, it could be said to be an enriched language because it develops certain selected components into unusually complete paradigms.

The formalization of language manifest in Kamsá ritual language can be traced to these complementary procedures, the increased structuring of linguistic output, and the thorough exploitation of selected linguistic components. These procedures produce an expressive and communicative medium which has surrendered the broad referential capacity of the ordinary speech variety in order to obtain an especially intense and evocative hold on a bounded referential universe – the universe of the primordial Kamsá community. Kamsá ritual language has no need of a broader scope of reference, since it explicitly maintains that present

events are identical with the immutable charter established by the deity and laid down in the example of the ancestors.

Efficacy

The final component of the semiotic constitution of Kamsá ritual language to be considered here is that of its efficacy: What can be accomplished through the use of this speech variety that cannot be accomplished through the use of the other Kamsá varieties? And what procedures must be followed in order to capitalize on this potential?

Kamsá ritual language precipitates a dialogue between mortals. While the deity is constantly mentioned, and is often thought to be listening in with approval, it is never directly addressed in this speech variety. Unlike prayer, which addresses the deity in the second person, the ritual language always refers to the deity in the third person. There is no indication that Kamsá ritual language is able to draw on the transformational powers of the deity in order to effect radical modification in the nature of things. On the contrary, it appears to be firmly rooted in the societal realm, and subject to the limitations of the mortal condition.

Even so, the ritual language possesses an efficacy that is not associated with ordinary discourse in Kamsá. Kamsá ritual language is an integral element in all Kamsá rites of passage, and the transformations effected in these ceremonies could not be achieved without the appropriate exchanges of ritual language. The efficacy of this speech variety is closely tied to the maintenance and manipulation of the social contract. Along with the other behavioral elements in the ceremonial context, the ritual language ushers the individual out of one socially defined phase and into another, and in this way perpetuates and constantly renovates the underlying societal foundation. From a wider angle, Kamsá ritual language can be viewed as a device for tapping into the potential social bonds fortuitously present in the encounter of any two Kamsá adults. Cooperation and sharing are unifying threads in the Kamsá social fabric, and the ritual language can be seen to promote and stabilize these vital social processes.

Adjusting our perspective to the mortal plane, we can still find a major scope for the efficacy of Kamsá ritual language in these societal functions. In order to properly fulfill them, ritual-language discourse must observe a set of conventional procedures. For the traditional greeting to be felicitously executed (Austin 1962; Foster 1974), the following conditions must obtain:

1. The two participants in the interchange must be adult members of the Kamsá community,
2. but they must neither be members of the same household, nor total strangers to one another.
3. The one who initiates the greeting has approached his respondent's house (in the most typical case) in order to initiate a period of sustained social intercourse.

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4. The verbal exchange conforms to the linguistic, performance, and thematic charter we have established for Kamsá ritual language, and
5. includes the phrase *nye palabra i saludo* (just this word of greeting).
6. Following the greeting, but not prior to it, these individuals may engage in sustained social intercourse.

These conditions are specified for the traditional greeting, but it is clear that other instances of ritual-language discourse could be subjected to a similar mode of analysis. As John Austin (1962:14) notes, "infelicity is an ill to which all acts are heir which have the general character of ritual or ceremonial," and the conditions for proper execution of these acts are most often readily apprehended.

CONCLUSION

It is probable that all speech communities possess the means of setting apart some portion of their discourse for ritual or ceremonial purposes. The procedures for accomplishing this may be highly codified, producing a palpably distinctive aural texturing and referential capacity clearly recognized as a separate speech variety. In bilingual speech communities one of the two codes may be reserved for these ceremonial uses (Rubin 1970). In the settings characterized by Charles Ferguson (1964) as diglossia, one of the two parallel speech varieties may carry this ceremonial burden. But these ceremonial or ritual forms are not everywhere so highly codified. Contemporary North American English contains politeness formulas, frequently identifiable by virtue of their tendency towards circumlocution, which deviate so slightly from ordinary usage that speakers can hardly be said to be drawing on a distinct speech variety in using them.

In distancing ceremonial forms from ordinary usage, speech repertoires must exploit the inherent properties of their codes. Thus the raised-up speech in Zuni, described by Dennis Tedlock (1976), incorporates a systematic shift in stress and intonation patterns which is only effective because ordinary Zuni rigidly structures these features. Kamsá ritual language exhibits a piling up of affixes, one possible means for distinguishing speech in a language with strong agglutinative properties. But while the details must vary from one setting to another in conformance with local linguistic properties, I would contend that ritual or ceremonial speech usage follows the general drift I articulated for Kamsá ritual language toward an increased structuring of linguistic production, associated with the intensive exploitation of selected resources, and productive of discourse with restricted referential capacity.

The formalization of speech is closely related to two other key variables in any description of ritual or ceremonial speech: accessibility and efficacy. Increased formalization produces lower levels of accessibility, and greater powers to effect changes in the world. For Kamsá ritual language, analysis of these three variables presents the following portrait:

1. It is highly formalized, presenting a distinctive aural texture and referential profile;

2. it is broadly accessible to members of the community, though a great deal of variation exists with respect to the ability to produce speech of this kind, and some opaque passages remain obscure to even the most knowledgeable of my consultants;

3. its efficacy is restricted to the societal plane, where it is endowed with important ceremonial functions.

These criteria, presented in abbreviated form here, have enabled us to distinguish with some precision this variety from other varieties in the Kamsá speech taxonomy. For example, with respect to *bngabe palabra*, the ordinary variety, this speech variety is somewhat less accessible, rather more formalized, and in possession of a higher degree of performative efficacy. These observations are less valid, it should be recalled, with respect to the attenuated forms of Kamsá ritual language which have entered into ordinary usage.

I would suggest that the three major criteria identified in producing an adequate description of Kamsá ritual language (viz. formalization, accessibility, and efficacy), could also figure prominently in the development of a typology of speech varieties utilized for ceremonial purposes. Thus Kamsá ritual language, a speech variety associated with social ritual, contrasts on these three dimensions with the esoteric ritual discourse of priest or shaman. The latter tends to be more highly formalized, often requiring the exact repetition of formulas; less accessible, being restricted frequently to a special category of person, or to someone with special training; and more efficacious, often being thought capable of radically transforming reality. Kamsá ritual language can be seen to occupy a *middle ground* in all these respects, between the ordinary varieties devoid for the most part of ceremonial function, and the shamanistic varieties, the property of the ritual specialists.

In this way we may sketch the broad design of a typology of speech varieties associated with ritual and ceremonial occasions. The fleshing-out of this skeleton must await further investigation, which might focus on the three dimensions isolated in our discussion of Kamsá ritual language. Concerning speech varieties of this kind, we may inquire:

On accessibility. What institutional barriers restrict access to the variety? Do inherent linguistic or performance features render discourse of this kind difficult to produce? Is this discourse readily intelligible to native speakers? Are there attenuated forms which are more accessible?

On formalization. Is discourse in this variety palpably distinguished from other varieties? Which linguistic features and levels are selected for exploitation? Is there room for improvisation?

On efficacy. What is the scope of effects achieved through this discourse? What procedures must be followed to secure these effects?

As we orient our research to issues of this sort, our understanding of the

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dynamics of speech varieties associated with ceremony and ritual should advance beyond the stage of preliminary dichotomization to comprehend the complex interplay between the occasion of use and the style of discourse characteristic of all speech ecologies.

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